

National Veterans Wheelchair Games



Athlete Profile (National)

Roberto Cruz – Attitude Change!

“I’m stronger now!” Those are the words Roberto Cruz emphasizes as he prepares for the 27th National Veterans Wheelchair Games. A 25-year-old combat injured veteran from Tampa, Fla., Cruz, who is also a brand new father, feels like a different person from one year ago. “Last year before I attended the Wheelchair Games, I felt very frustrated at time. I was down...I didn’t know what the future held,” he recalled. Now, Cruz says he is much happier and more confident, and he credits his “new positive attitude” to the event. “After the Games, my entire attitude changed because I learned from other athletes that I’m not alone and I have my whole life left to live. There are generations of veterans who have gone through what we (Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans) have, and they are still living and accomplishing great things.”

Cruz, a native of Puerto Rico, joined the Army at 21. Stationed at Fort Stewart/Hunter Army Airfield in Georgia, he was deployed to Iraq in December 2004. Cruz is now among the combat-wounded veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom after being shot by a sniper in the city of Tikrit on August 14, 2005.

He describes the incident and his injury in vivid detail. “While I was on the tower guarding the post, I was jumped by a sniper,” he said. “The bullet entered through my left arm, passed through my lung and finally lodged near my spinal cord between T-4 and T-5. I remember my body felt like it had gone to sleep, but I had no feeling from my waist down. I thought a rocket propeller had blown off my legs. I remember asking my sergeant if my legs were still there. He reassured me that they were and he told me to stand up, but I couldn’t.”

Initially, Cruz received care at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. A resident of Tampa, Florida, he now receives continuing care at the James A. Haley Veterans’ Hospital in Tampa. It was there that Cruz was encouraged by a physical therapist to join their local wheelchair team. Now, trying new sports is a hobby for Cruz, and he has attended several Paralympic development training clinics for newly injured veterans. He attributes his confidence to learn about new sports from his first experience at the 26th National Veterans Wheelchair Games, held in 2006 in Anchorage, Alaska.

Because of his injuries, Cruz, who is competing as a paraplegic in the open division, will take on an added challenge of competing as a right-handed athlete. Previously left-hand dominant, he will compete in air guns, table tennis and three field events this year. “After my injury, I never thought I would be able to compete in sports again,” Cruz said. “I feel fortunate to still have all of my extremities. I have always been physically active and I now know there is a future – in sports and in life. I hope to come to every Wheelchair Games so I can continue to win medals and learn from others.”